

These findings reveal that the PG rating is as uninformative for movies overall as it is for movies shown on premium cable channels. The speculation that many movies are rated PG because of the presence of a few bad words is consistent with the finding that a quarter of PG-rated movies are rated that way because of language content only. Fully half of PG-rated movies have neither violence nor sex. A parent is forced to seek information on the MPAA's website or in other locations in order to have any indication of what is in store in a PG-rated movie.

These findings give further weight to the criticisms of the new television ratings, which are based on the MPAA ratings. They confirm that such age-based ratings do not provide parents with the information they need to protect their children from content they consider harmful.

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

June 18, 1997

Mr. Reed Hundt and the FCC Commission
Office of the Secretary
Federal Communication Commission
1919 M Street, NW
Washington DC 20554

Video Program Ratings Proposal
CS Docket No. 97-55
FCC 97-34

**RE: Comments of the National PTA
on aspects of the TV industry's
v-chip ratings proposal and if it
meets standards set forth in
aspects of Section 551 of the
Telecommunications Act of 1996.
The National PTA urges the FCC
to reject the industry-
recommended ratings.**

The National PTA, a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization comprised of over 6.6 million parents, teachers, and other child advocates in the United States, Europe, and the Pacific, thanks you for this opportunity to comment on the v-chip rating system. This system was presented to the FCC by the TV Rating Implementation Group, a group officially representing the TV industry chaired jointly by Msrs. Jack Valenti, president and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America; Decker Anstrom, president and CEO of the national Cable Television Association; and Eddie Fritts, president and CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters.

Our comments follow the 1996 enactment of the Telecommunications Act, which in Section 551 encourages the video programming industry to "establish voluntary rules for

rating video programming that contains sexual, violent or other indecent material about which parents should be informed before it is displayed to children,” and to voluntarily broadcast signals containing these ratings. The act further requires the FCC to “consult with appropriate public interest groups and interested individuals from the private sector” about the industry’s voluntary plan and then to determine if “such rules are acceptable to the Commission.” The commission is obligated, under Section 551(b) and (e)(1) of the act to determine whether the industry-recommended plan is acceptable. If the commission determines that the plan is not acceptable, the act requires the commission to establish an advisory committee to study the issue and make recommendations on a rating system, and then to prescribe “guidelines and recommendations” for such a rating system. The National PTA urges the FCC to reject the industry-recommended ratings system because the on-screen icon does not provide sufficient content information so that parents can make decisions about what is appropriate TV programming for their children. Furthermore, the content icons must be related to off screen descriptions that more precisely clarify what the icons represent.

We are at a crucial and tenuous juncture pertaining to children’s television policy, and the decisions that will be made by the FCC and the television industry during the next several weeks will determine whether parents and the industry can co-exist without further government activity, or whether parents and the Congress will resort to legislative action that will be far more restrictive than the v-chip. What hangs in the balance is nothing more than the First Amendment. But parents want the First Amendment to work for them as well as for the industry, which often hides behind free speech protections and protracted lawsuits as delaying tactics in responding to increased violence on television. For the National PTA, I am the least important person here. It is our parents and our grassroots that spoke loudly and clearly about their preference for a content rating system during the most recent FCC v-chip comment period and it will be our grassroots that will appeal to Congress for further redress if the industry turns yet another deaf ear. There are very few issues in our organization that have the grassroots resonance and interest as does the quality of children’s television and concerns over the violence, sexual content, and adult language in TV programming.

In fact, real parents flooded the FCC with comments during the recent comment period related to the v-chip. The following are excerpts from what some of the “real” parents had to say:

“I am not pleased with the language and situations which dominate many of the television shows which are on the air today. My first preference would be to eliminate the material, but as that does not seem likely in the near future, I feel the very least that can be done for families is to allow intelligent decisions.”

Janet E. Boatman

Kingman, Texas PTA

"My husband and I both feel there is too much sex, violence, and trash on the TV and find it difficult to find programs that are suitable for the whole family to watch together."

Mr. and Mrs. R.T. Varkalis

Montgomery County, Maryland PTA

"To give you an example, I have five year old twins, and an eight year old. My eight year old is much more easily disturbed by violence on television than are either of my younger children."

Barbara C. Coe

Glen Haven Elementary School PTA

Silver Spring, Maryland

"As a writer for ABC-TV General Hospital, and as a mom, I especially feel the quandary of how to entertain the adult audience without shocking the sensibilities of the youngster."

Eleanor Mancusi

Mom of Two

local New York PTA

"It's frightening when you think of the lack of help we've had in the past on making informed decisions as to suitable TV viewing. I do believe it is evident in some of the behavior our children are exhibiting. Please listen to the concerns of PTA members. Our goal is the protection of all of our children and youth."

Laurie L. Mussel

Iowa PTA President

"Without information, my husband and I have had to make a more blanket decision to allow our children to only watch children's programming on the public broadcasting channel, select educational shows on such channels as Discovery, and videos that we rent or purchase for them."

Sherri Cornett

Boulder Avenue Elementary School PTA

Billings, Montana

"As a person in my early 40's, I grew up watching television. Watching TV was often a family activity. We laughed, cried and learned from programs shown on TV. As my own children grew, they watched the typical "Sesame Street," "Mr. Rogers," cartoons, re-runs of "Lassie," and "Little House on the Prairie." Now that they are teenagers I am embarrassed to watch and listen to the programs I see them watching. Programs shown before nine o'clock in the evening contain more profanity, sex, suggestive situations, and pointless humor than I can stand! With all the problems and temptations that children must face daily, why must television further encourage negative behaviors?"

Cathy Robertson

Thomas Middle School PTA

Arlington Heights, Illinois

"With the incredible proliferation of material available over the airways in this day and age and with the incontrovertible fact, it is simply impossible to even the most meticulous parent to review every possible program children of all ages might want to see."

*Patricia G. Sidas
Nutmeg Statewide PTA
Connecticut*

"The promos for various shows need to be monitored. Certain mature audience shows have promotional spots during family hours that are very questionable. These promos need to be screened."

*Susan S. Hein
Bolton, Connecticut*

"In a society in which our children are spending more time than ever in front of the television screen, children are being taught through this box and we must insure the quality of programming."

*Mrs. Susan M. Olson
Gadsden Elementary PTA President and 178 members
Savannah, Georgia*

"We have heard so much about violence and how it affects our children. Please help parents that are willing to make this effort to raise decent, moral children who are not learning things before they are ready to."

*Karen DeCesare
Deltona, Florida*

"I am not an advocate of censorship. But I do believe that one of the most crucial duties of our society is to make sure that the best values of our culture are given to our children, not the worst. We cannot be in the room at all times when our children watch TV. Often, I come back into the TV room to find that channel surfing has ended up in an inappropriate place."

*Michael Fleming
Gorham, Maine*

Particularly disturbing to our members are findings of research studies which show three possible effects of viewing television violence on young people. According to Rand researchers John P. Murray and Barbara Lonnberg, television violence can create the following effects:

- Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others
- They may be more fearful of the world around them

- They may be more likely to behave in an aggressive or harmful way toward others

According to several recent studies, television violence has NOT diminished, despite the passage of the 1990 Television Violence Act, the Children's Television Act, and the v-chip provision in the Telecommunications Act. A March 1997 study concluded that there has been no meaningful change in the presentation of violence on television during the last two years. The National Television Violence Study conducted by the University of California, Santa Barbara, found little change from 1994-1995 and 1995-1996 in such elements as the portrayal of pain and harm to victims or the long-term negative consequences that result from violence. The researchers identified over 18,000 violent incidents in a sample of more than 2,000 hours drawn from 23 cable and broadcast channels during the 1995-1996 television season. Over half of all the violent incidents still failed to show the victim suffering any pain. Long-term negative consequences from violence were portrayed in only 16 percent of the programs, compared to 13 percent last year, cited as an insignificant change by the study. In addition, three out of four violent scenes contained no remorse, criticism, or penalty for violence, and "bad" characters go unpunished in 37 percent of the programs. Television programs that employed a strong anti-violence theme remained extremely rare, holding constant at 4 percent of all violent shows.

Many parents are beginning to complain, not only about violent program content, but also about violence in promos and advertisements as well. A 1996 UCLA report on this issue defined television promos as video highlights to sell a product of the network and to expose viewers to new programs. The report said that promos raise serious concerns, particularly because they feature violence out of context. It is almost impossible, says the report, to provide sufficient context for any violence that does occur. The study concludes that violence is used in many ways in promos as a "hook" to draw viewers into the programs.

We want the TV industry to understand that in many households, children may be watching television unsupervised with no adult to make program choices. With the increasing number of latchkey children and working families, this situation is becoming a fact of life. Parents are not asking for censorship; they are asking the industry for a little assistance. Clearly this committee would not protect teachers who taught violence to children. Yet why would we condone a steady diet of children being exposed to TV violence, year after year. The Nielson Index estimates that the average child will have witnessed some 18,000 murders and countless robberies, bombings, smugglings, assaults, and beatings during their years of TV viewing. What kind of social role-modeling is that for children to emulate? How is it possible that this program menu could be educationally redeeming or have any positive impact on the character of our youth?

The National PTA and the industry have been trying to work out issues of children's programming for many years. I am not the first PTA leader to come before the FCC, but one of a procession of many National PTA representatives beginning as far back as the 1930s who have petitioned Congress and the regulatory agencies about the need for quality television programming for their children and families. The National PTA has been at the forefront of these issues ever since, pushing for the creation of the Federal Communications Commission in 1933, monitoring and protesting deceptive advertising on radio and television aimed at children, and advocating in favor of the Television Violence Act and the Children's Television Act. The PTA has urged a three-hour minimum of children's television programming per week which we ultimately hope to convince the FCC to increase to one hour per day. Most recently, the National PTA supported the v-chip provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which is designed to provide information to parents so they are able to make better media choices for children. Even after 60 years of National PTA activism on these issues, hearings such as today's must be held to goad a resistant industry toward meeting its obligations to the public, and more specifically to children and families, as required by the Children's Television Act.

The reason the v-chip legislation and these comments are necessary is because voluntary self-regulation over the years and the Television Violence Act produced little results while parent frustration over increasing violence on television has escalated. Our preference has traditionally been to seek non-legislative solutions to children's television issues. However, as industry resistance to parent concerns about violence on television has increased, so has parent pressure to use legislative vehicles to force the industry to reduce violent programming and increase educational options for families. In fact, parents have been extremely patient with the industry. The v-chip has been proposed as the next step along an incremental continuum of pressure applied to an industry that has often responded to parents with violent programming, not better programming.

When the television industry agreed to establish a rating system and rate its programming, the National PTA asked to be part of the process as the ratings were being developed. In July 1996, National PTA President Joan Dykstra met with representatives of the Television Ratings Implementation Group. The National PTA indicated its willingness to help make the ratings useful to parents, and even offered to sponsor parent focus groups in fall 1996 to ascertain the kind of ratings information parents needed. Until several weeks ago, the TV industry did not take us up on our offer. During the past week, for the first time, the National PTA and other organizations have been meeting with industry representatives to determine the possibility of negotiating a rating system that would provide appropriate content information to make the rating system useful to parents. Even as we meet this morning, those negotiations are continuing.

Because we believed that any position that the National PTA would take had to be based on our membership views, we joined with Dr. Joanne Cantor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives to devise and implement a survey, the results of which were released in November 1996. The

information from the survey was communicated to the Television Ratings Implementation Group the same day we released the information to the public and the media.

Obviously, the proposed ratings do not reflect the view of either the survey conducted by the National PTA or those conducted by the *U.S News and World Report* of September 9, 1996 or the Media Studies Center/Roper Center poll of December 12, 1996—all of which indicate that parents want a ratings system that gives them comprehensive, objective details about programs so they can make informed decisions about what to watch. Why do parents want this information?

1. Parents believe that they can make a better decision about what their children should watch than the industry.
2. Children develop differently, and are very different at the same ages.
3. Parents have differing priorities. Some parents may have concerns about language. Others want information about the types and frequency of violence in a program.

An age-specific system simply does not get the job done. The FCC should accept no rating system that does not include content icons on the TV screen such as V (for violence), S (for depiction of sex and nudity) and L (for adult language). Some cable networks, including Home Box Office, Cinemax, and Showtime, already have their own codes or provide at least minimal descriptive information about violence, sex, and language. In addition, the industry's existing rating descriptions for each of the categories are confusing and insufficient. Their descriptors mix violence, language, and sex and are too general to provide useful guidance for parents. Parents want to know the nature of the offending material, how much there is, and how graphic it is. This would include cartoons which may include everything from mild violence such as Tom and Jerry to intense violence such as the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers.

The industry has suggested that IF it were to propose adding content ratings to the icons, only one level of V, S, or L would be needed. The industry's theory seems to be that since content descriptors are intended to convey "intensity," and they think that PG is already a content category that is limited to nothing higher than level 1, parents need only one V. If, in fact, the content in PG were limited to low intensity, then it would be a reasonable argument that only one level of V, S, or L would be needed. But the research of Children Now, the Parents Television Council, and our own organization has confirmed that, in practice, PG includes content that spans the spectrum from the mild to the graphic. In fact, PG has attracted the most attention both because 2/3 of all rated programming is ending up in this category, and because it warns parents of a problem, but does not tell them what it is.

In addition, the National PTA is requesting that the FCC adopt the following for a valid ratings system:

1. A v-chip band that is broad enough to allow parents to receive more than one rating system. Although this issue is covered another set of regulatory proceedings, it is complementary to the amount of information that parents have access to in determining their watching venue.
2. A rating icon on the screen that is larger, more prominently placed on the screen, and appears more frequently during the course of the program. Our preference is that it appear on the screen for the entire program. In this way, parents who come into a program late or who would otherwise miss the icon would be sure to be informed.
3. A rating board that is independent of the industry and the FCC and that includes parents. Currently, the industry rates itself, which is a conflict of interest. The producers could hardly be an impartial audience, or capable of providing consistent and impartial information. The purpose of the ratings monitoring board should include guidance for the people who must do the ratings before the ratings are attached, not just after. It should prepare and disseminate a manual, frequently updated, that provides guidance about rating issues and how to resolve them in a consistent way.

In addition, the National Cable Television Association with Cable in the Classroom and the National PTA have been working cooperatively over the past several years on the *Family and Community Critical Viewing Skills Project*. This cooperative effort is designed to provide parents and teachers throughout the country with information and skills to help families make better choices in the television programs they watch and to improve the way they watch these programs. We are tremendously proud of this project and relationship. To complement this project with a content-based ratings system would be an effective merger between parent responsibility to develop better TV watching skills and the TV industry's responsibility of providing good information to enhance these skills.

We are at a crucial and tenuous juncture pertaining to children's television. If done correctly, the system of v-chip technology will provide a balance between the industry's concern about government regulatory excesses and the public's concern about better quality programming for children and families. The v-chip can balance the industry's freedom to broadcast with parents' right to choose; the producer's freedom to produce with parents' right to have information about what is produced; parents' responsibility to monitor television programming for their children with the industry's responsibility to provide a system that gives parents adequate information about the content of a program.

We acknowledge that the industry has taken an important first step by proposing a voluntary rating system. We also believe that, if possible, a rating system should be developed with minimal government interference and maximum industry cooperation. Therefore, the decision that will be made by the FCC within the next weeks will determine whether parents and the industry can co-exist and strike a balance without

legislative action that will go far beyond the v-chip and venture into the constitutional quagmire of "safe harbor" resolutions if a meaningful content rating system is not adopted. What hangs in the balance is nothing more than the First Amendment. The v-chip is program neutral. But parents want the First Amendment to work for them as well as for the industry which often hides behind free speech protections and threats of protracted lawsuits as delaying tactics in responding to any means that would decrease violence on television. While we have this opportunity, we should take advantage of it. It is important that a rating system be developed that provides meaningful content information to parents. Once a ratings system is institutionalized, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to revise. A lot is at stake—information for parents, no First Amendment restrictions on programming for the industry, and a private-public initiative that requires minimal government interference to protect the public interest. Or going about the old way of doing things.

I thank the commission for the opportunity of commenting on a very important issue.